

Sermon 49, Not Walking by Sight, Proverbs 14:8-15

Proposition: Don't judge by appearances; wisdom will give you insight into what lies beneath the surface.

- I. The Wise Understand what they're Doing, v. 8
- II. The Hidden Nature of
 - A. Real Entertainment, v. 9a
 - B. Real Fellowship, v. 9b
 - C. Real Feelings, v. 10
 - D. Real Destinies, vv. 11-12
 - E. Real Pain, v. 13
- III. The Wise See the Future Hidden in the Present, vv. 14-15
- IV. The Wise See Christ Hidden in Wisdom!

Introduction

Dearly beloved congregation of our Lord Jesus Christ, have you ever lamented the lost art of asking questions? I am frequently reminded of the old joke, "What's the first letter in yellow?"

"Y."

"Because I want to know!"

The fact of the matter is that most people don't want to know. Most people will not ask you about yourself, will not take the trouble to dig up your hopes, fears, and dreams. Indeed, most people think it's a bad idea to take the conversation deeper, and they actually prefer safe subjects like the weather and the traffic to the real questions that dominate our thinking — questions like what our hearts really love, what really satisfies us, what gives us the most pain, and what we would have if we had everything we wanted. I was at a meeting of the Gillette Ministerial Association last summer where the conversation was doing its usual shallow thing. I asked the Roman Catholic deacon sitting across from me what his question would be for God at that moment when he is welcomed into Heaven and has the opportunity to meet his maker face to face for the first time. He said, "That's one of the questions we train people to ask in our intentional discipleship curriculum. I'm so glad you asked me that!"

And then he proceeded to not answer the question. It was maddening. Indeed, the general consensus of the group seemed to be that they would have no questions, and would simply bask in the presence of Christ. That may be, but I was still disappointed by the group's reticence to dive beneath the surface of things and get down to the dynamics of what's really going on, of what the heart is really thinking, of the deep things of the human spirit.

Well, brothers and sisters, the point of this morning's sermon is to expound the truth that wisdom gives you insight into what lies beneath the surface. Wisdom will teach you to walk by

faith in the realities you can't see. Above all, wisdom will teach you to see Christ concealed in the sayings of this book. So pay attention to the wisdom that will let you look beneath the surface and see the Eternal Word at the foundation of all reality.

I. The Wise Understand what they're Doing, v. 8

The first thing our text this morning tells us is that the wise understand what they're doing. We have a definition of wisdom here. Wisdom is understanding one's way. The way, of course, is a metaphor that recurs throughout Scripture; our modern synonym is "lifestyle." The prudent person demonstrates wisdom by understanding his lifestyle.

What does that imply? That a lifestyle is something we can and should understand! A lifestyle is something meaningful, not meaningless. It is not a brute reality that just is; rather, it is charged with significance. A wise man can look at his lifestyle and with a single glance intuitively discern what his lifestyle means and where it's headed.

Brothers and sisters, let's talk for just a second about this issue of what things mean. Imagine going out in the yard and picking up a stone. What does the stone mean? What is its significance? Most of us would say that it simply is, that it doesn't mean anything. It is a brute fact, a brute reality. It is, in a word, *meaningless*.

Most of us would say that because that's what our culture tells us. We are the ones who impose meaning and value on a brute reality that simply is, existing without good or evil, meaning or value, unless we come along and evaluate it and give it a meaning.

Why is this line of thinking so popular? Because it is diametrically opposed to this proverb. In a world of intrinsically meaningless objects, events, and states of affairs, yet another meaningless thing is my lifestyle. My way just is. It's who I am. It's what I do. You can tell me that it means that I am a nasty person, an evil person who's going to Hell, and I will laugh at you and say "No, my way is meaningless. It doesn't signify that I'm going to Hell. It doesn't signify that I have a rotten character and a fallen nature. It doesn't signify that I have fallen short of what God created me to be. It simply is, and it is no more meaningful than a stone."

Brothers and sisters, our proverb addresses that response. It labels it "the folly of fools," which is deceit. That's right: This whole way of thinking that says first "the world is meaningless" and then "My lifestyle is meaningless" is just one big lie. The prudent person tells the truth to himself, and that truth is that his lifestyle does mean something, both about his present character and his future destiny. Proverbs has relentlessly drawn this connection, over and over and over, since chapter 1. If you are prudent and wise, you will see the outcome of your way of life.

Hebrews 13:7 reminds us: "Remember your leaders, those who spoke to you the word of God. Consider the outcome of their way of life, and imitate their faith." The lifestyle of a church leader is meaningful. The lifestyle of a human being is meaningful.

This, in turn, means that getting a tattoo, a piercing, a certain kind of clothing, a certain kind of job or home decor — all of those things are significant. I remember a friend once telling

me “I dyed my hair blue and my grandma told me, ‘Well, it tells me something about what you think of Scripture.’”

My friend was highly annoyed by this. So I said to her, “Your grandma is exactly right. It certainly does tell the world something about what you think of Scripture.”

Brothers and sisters, go back to that stone in your yard. What does it mean? It means that Jesus Christ is the creator and sustainer of the world. By its very existence, it proclaims the existence and glory, the eternal power and divine nature, of the one who made it and who holds it in being. We don’t assign this meaning to it; it objectively carries this meaning along with it. This is one of the truths that Thomas Aquinas would call self-evident in itself, though not to us as fallen, depraved sinners. Every fact, every object, every state of affairs, carries along with it the stamp of a divine creator. “Of Him, through Him, and to Him are *all things*.” That is the Bible’s final verdict on reality. All of it came from God. All of it is ordered toward God. And all of it exists through His continual sustaining power. That is not our best guess; that is not a religious fiction making us feel good about an uncaring world. That is actually the bottom-line reality of what this world is. The world is charged with the grandeur of God.

Wisdom, then, understands first of all that one’s lifestyle is meaningful, that only a fool accepts the lie that we are living in the realm of brute facts. Be prudent and understand your lifestyle by comparing it to the word of God. What way are you going? What is the character of your way? If you don’t know the answer to these questions, then you are not wise or prudent. The mismatched couplet indicates that the folly of fools is to fail to understand their way. If you don’t know what your way means or where it’s going, then you are a foolish fool indeed, deluded, warped and sinful, self-condemned.

II. The Hidden Nature of

Well, part of understanding one’s way is to understand some of the major components of it. What is entertaining — and what isn’t? Of what does genuine friendship consist? What are people really feeling beneath the image they project? And what are the real destinies and real pains of people who think they’re in the right way but are actually backsliding? Brothers and sisters, we have a little diagnostic here, a checklist that helps us look beneath the surface appearance and see what’s really going on in the hearts of the people we love — and in our own hearts.

A. Real Entertainment, v. 9a

The first thing whose real nature is often hidden from us is entertainment. Fools mock at sin. That is, fools find guilt funny. They think transgression is hilarious. They think sin is entertaining. Brothers and sisters, are we guilty of this? Now, it’s not wrong for entertainment to portray sin. But we must always ask what the point of the sin is. Why is this sin included in this book/show/story/song/film? If it is to be titillating, or prurient — that is, if the sin is there to be enjoyed as such — then only a fool would enjoy it. If the sin is there to show what’s wrong with the world, to illustrate the darkness which the light overcomes, to make you sorrow over the human condition, then the entertainment is valuable and one from which the wise can learn. But if the sin is there so that you can enjoy sin without actually participating in it, then the more fool

you. Because guess what: To laugh at sin and be entertained by it because it is sinful is the sign of a very perverse and wretched heart.

B. Real Fellowship, v. 9b

But opposed to this false entertainment that comes from watching people sin (e.g., porn, films glorifying violence or disrespect to parental and scholastic authority) is the reality of good will, favor, acceptance. Whichever of these translations you prefer, the implication is obvious: Among those who think sin is entertaining there is no real community. The *Stanford Social Innovation Review* reminds us that “community is not a place, a building, or an organization; nor is it an exchange of information over the Internet. Community is both a feeling and a set of relationships among people. People form and maintain communities to meet common needs.”⁴

Community is a set of relationships. And those relationships are marked by grace and good will only among the upright. You’ve heard the English proverb that says there is no honor among thieves. So there isn’t. And there is no grace and good will among the crooked. In other words, though they do have relationships with each other, those relationships are not marked by acceptance, by unconditional love, by delight in each other as human beings. They are marked by rejection, by pressure, by using people for one’s own ends.

Real community, real fellowship, cannot be found among those who find evil funny. Those who mock at guilt won’t know what acceptance and forgiveness feel like.

C. Real Feelings, v. 10

Well, our entertainment choices tell us something about our way and whether we will have real loving relationships. But even in the closest relationship of acceptance and favor, there remains a part of you which is opaque to everyone, “thoughts that do often lie too deep for tears.” Even if you want to, you can’t always fully expose yourself to another human being. This proverb, again, uses a simple truth from everyday life to remind us not to walk merely by sight. You don’t know what everyone around you is going through. You are unaware of their deepest joys and toughest bitternesses.

There’s a lesson here about living in the church. Though there is acceptance among the upright, there will not always be understanding. People in the church can and will say the wrong thing. They will inadvertently (and deliberately too, sometimes) push your buttons. They won’t get it, and there are times when you will say to your closest Christian brother or sister, “You don’t get it. You just don’t get it.” Brothers and sisters, *that’s only to be expected*. Both on the upside and the downside, your Christian community (and every community of which you’re part) will not always understand. Sometimes they will rarely understand. Stop holding that against them. Stop holding it against me, your pastor. Stop holding it against your spouse. Stop holding it against the elders, or the nursery worker or Sunday School teacher who said exactly the wrong thing to you last week. You know what you’re going through. But often enough, no one else will. At least, no other human being. Jesus understands. But don’t expect that His people will be just

⁴ David M. Chavis & Kien Lee, “What Is Community Anyway?” *Stanford Social Innovation Review*, May 12, 2015.

as omniscient as He is. Be content with His acceptance. And brothers and sisters, be the upright who show favor and acceptance. We won't always understand each other. But we should always love each other.

D. Real Destinies, vv. 11-12

Well, the sage continues his exposition of the folly of walking by sight alone when he exposes the real destinies of the righteous and wicked. He presents two proverbs on this theme back-to-back.

First comes the proverb contrasting the house of the wicked and the tent of the righteous. Already in those two names we see the contrast. A tent is impermanent by its very nature. Even the nicest of tents is designed to be taken down and packed up. A quick search for tents turned up a 284 sq. ft. tent with standing room for 15 people for \$6000. You won't find a house with standing room for 15 for \$6000. The wicked are rich; they own houses. The righteous are poor; they are strangers and sojourners, dwelling in tents with Isaac and Jacob.

Right? That's what we see at this point in our lives. The wicked run Wall Street hedge funds. The wicked drives BMWs and Mercedes. The wicked have the media, the universities, the legislatures, and most of the executive and judicial positions. But their homes will be destroyed. Those mansions aren't permanent. But the tents of the righteous, the worn-out cars and empty bank accounts — those things that are the earthly result of faithfulness to Christ will actually bud and burst into new life. The tent of the upright will grow up into a heavenly mansion prepared by Christ Himself.

If you only live by what you can see, you won't believe it. You'll sell your soul for worldly relevance and influence. You would rather have one op-ed in *The Washington Post* than three hundred answered prayers. But brothers and sisters, what really counts with God is not the color of your skin, or the coolness of your marketing, or the reach of your influence. What He cares about is whether your character is one of internalized wisdom, that is, one that fears God.

That reality of fearing God will make or break your ethical sensibility. The fool thinks he's doing the right thing. He thinks his way is correct. He admires himself for championing rights for oppressed LGBTP minorities. He thinks he's impossibly righteous for championing schemes whereby the government takes wealth from those who created it and gives it to those more deserving people who actually need it. The fool thinks he's a good person because he clears all obstacles out of his child's path, or because he parrots all the nostrums of his time and place, or because he's sure that it's possible to be good without God and presents himself as Exhibit A for that proposition.

When have your ways seemed right to you, only for you to later discover that they led to death? Brothers and sisters, so many crusaders with a cause inhabit this world of ours. All of them have a way that seems right to them. *Sincerity is no measure of whether a cause is correct.* The end of every sinful way really is death. And no matter how right it seems to you, you will still die. The woman saw that the tree was *good* for food (the useful good), *pleasant* to the eyes (the aesthetic good), and a tree *to be desired* (the delectable good) to make one wise. Has there

ever been an action that seemed more right than eating the forbidden fruit? I can't think of one off the top of my head. And what was the end of Eve's action? Death in the world, and all our woe. Every bad thing that's ever happened can be traced back to that original act of disobedience.

Look below the surface, friends. The end of these ways is death. If God says it's sin, don't engage in it. Don't support it. Don't tell people who want to do it that they are being unfairly treated by a world that doesn't see that they have a right to their sin. Walk by faith that God's commands are true, and that just because it seems right to you doesn't mean that God thinks it's right.

E. Real Pain, v. 13

Well, one final look beneath the surface tells us that the outward emotions you see may not be what the person is actually feeling. Sometimes laughter cackles from an aching heart. Sometimes joy ends in grief. Just because someone smiled, or laughed, doesn't mean that everything's okay. So again, don't be content with the outward manifestations — but also don't be disappointed if someone can't read your heart. The fact of the matter is that, on the human level, each one of us is going to spend some time alone with pain. Other people will know that you're suffering and they won't want to get involved. Why would they? To get involved in someone else's pain is to experience it yourself.

That, of course, is exactly what Jesus Christ did. He saw our pain and had compassion on us. He ended His heavenly joy by stepping into our world of grief. But while here, He overcame death and entered into the joy of His reward.

III. The Wise See the Future Hidden in the Present, vv. 14-15

Well, brothers and sisters, what happens when you have the wisdom to see past appearances and discern reality beneath them? Here's what happens: you see the good that's coming to the righteous, and the evil that's coming to the wicked, and you adjust your behavior accordingly.

So v. 14 warns the backslider in heart. Who is this? A person who no longer fears and knows God in the way that he ought to. A backslider is a person who once knew the truth and sought to obey it, but has since turned away from the fullness of the gospel. He is a backslider, not in outward practices, but in the depths of his heart. In other words, like Solomon, he's still going through the motions. He still shows up in church. He still talks the talk. He still walks almost all of the walk. But in his heart, he's open to sin in a new way. He's willing to accept sin in a new way. The wise in heart will receive commandments, but the backslider is beginning to reject commandments he once received.

What's the consequence? He will have his fill of his own ways. Once again, the sin is its own punishment. God has set the world up in such a way that if you turn away from Him in any way, eventually the consequences of that decision will poison you and you will come to loathe them. Yet, as we daily see, many people who loathe their sins persist in them to the undoing of their very souls. They have what we would think is the fill of their ways, but Hell is proof that people can persist in getting their bellyfull indefinitely.

The positive side, though, is that the good man will be satisfied with the outcome of his ways. Live as a wise father, and unless something intervenes you will see your children's children and peace upon Israel. Live as a faithful pastor, and you will see your congregation following Christ faithfully. Live as a hard worker, and you will see your bank account nicely topped off. Again, this is not always an ironclad guarantee in this life. Things can and do intervene all the time. But the natural tendency of obedience is toward wealth, success, and reward.

The simple man believes everything. He's never heard the maxim "Believe none of what you hear and only half of what you see." Whatever someone says he takes as gospel truth. Whatever superficial analysis he hears, he believes without considering the agenda, the bias, the background of the person presenting it. And thus, he meanders through life without thinking about his way. In him, we have come full circle to the fool who doesn't understand his own way. But the prudent man, the man who understands where he's going and his path for getting there, that man ponders his steps. He thinks about where he's going and whether his route is working.

So do you think about where you're going? Do you ponder your steps? Do you believe that it's possible to understand your ways, that states of affairs have meaning, that of the Son and through the Spirit and to the Father are all things, *all things*?

IV. The Wise See Christ Hidden in Wisdom!

If you do, then you see Christ hidden in wisdom. In these very admonitions to peer below the surface you see the eternal Word of the Father holding the cosmos together. How will this message change you this week?

First of all, don't believe everything you hear and see. Think about what your observations actually mean, and evaluate everything in light of the truth that the good man's tent with bud but the wicked man's house will be destroyed. Look at the present in light of the future. That means when your children are driving you out of your mind, and when your reading of the news has left you more disgusted than ever with our country and our leaders. At that moment, remember the destiny of the wise and the destruction coming for the foolish. Learn to live without satisfaction now because you're looking to the greater satisfaction you will have in the age to come.

Second, see Christ as the wisdom of God and Word of the Father. Look below the apparent meaninglessness of every object and event to see Christ the Creator and Redeemer. That stone in your yard has His fingerprints on it. That sentence in your mind is intelligible only in His light. So look to Him, and never be ashamed. Amen.